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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 DHAKA 005706

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SUBJECT: BANGLADESH OPPOSITION HOLDS MEGA RALLY SAFELY

REF: DHAKA 05648

Classified By: A/POLCOUNS David Renz, reason para 1.4 d

1 (SBU) Summary: Despite government roadblocks to prevent their attendance, and a government engineered transport strike, thousands gathered amidst tight security in the largest political rally since August 21, 2004 when bomb blasts at an Awami League rally killed 22. The AL led 14 party opposition again demanded reform of the caretaker government and election commission, issued a 23 point political platform of what they would do once in power, and spelled out future political actions to press their demands and remove the BNP-Jamaat Islami government. End summary.

2 (SBU) On November 22, by the start of the program at 2 PM local, an estimated 100,000 people waited in the outdoor arena, Paltan Maidan, and surrounding area for the rally speeches to start. Media reported that as many as 300 people were injured in opposition processions as they made their way to the area. Opposition leaders claim that the government arrested as many as 10,000 people, sealed off entry points to Dhaka with road blocks, engineered a transport workers strike, and told bus drivers and boat owners not to transport potential attendees in an effort to stop supporters from attending the rally.

3. (SBU) Shiekh Hasina demanded the BNP-Jamaat government step down saying that they supported Islamist militants, crippled the economy, failed to govern by permitting corruption and nepotism, killed thousands of people including journalists and indigenous peoples while permitting bombs blasts and militants to kill judges, accused BNP and Jamaat leaders of being involved in the bombs blasts, and accused government leaders of profiteering while prices of essentials increased.

4. (SBU) Al General Secretary Abdul Jalil read a 23 point "common minimal program" of what the opposition would do if they came to power. Starting with a vow that they would not accept any election without reforms in the caretaker government and the election commission, the opposition promised to find and prosecute the bomb attackers, stop extra-judicial killings, separate the judiciary from the executive, strengthen local government, stop corruption, require financial disclosure for politicians and top civil servants, better regulate prices of essentials, open closed factories and mills, eliminate poverty, reduce unemployment, provide for freedom fighters, eradicate gender disparities, improve education and health care, ensure freedom of the press, implement the Chittagong Hill Tracts accords, ensure optimal use of energy supplies, and emphasize regional cooperation of water resources and trade.

5. (SBU) The AL called for a dawn to dusk hartal for November 24 to protest the government's attempts to obstruct opposition supporters from attending the rally. Opposition leaders accused the government of creating a wildcat transport strike by arresting transport leader Mujibur Rahman the day before the rally, knowing that transport workers would strike to force the release of their leader. The hartal kicks off a two month long program of political activities that include sit-ins at government offices, demonstrations and a long marches from an outlying city towards Dhaka.

6. (C) BNP MP Ziaur Rahman Khan told poloff, when asked if the Awami League and its supporters benefited from the rally, that "the rally did help focus on what is wrong with the country, but overkill on the negative is counterproductive." Khan was critical of government attempts to squelch supporters from attending the rally, saying it was "unnecessary." When asked about Sheikh Hasina's accusations that PM Zia, her son Tarique Rahman, Jamaat Islami's Industries Minister Nazami, and State Minister Barbar are behind the bomb attacks, Khan sidestepped the question saying that the "Awami League loses when Sheikh Hasina speaks."

7. (C) Comment: Not down and out, the AL showed they can organize a large rally despite obstacles that are thrown in the path. The next measure, to see if the the rally helped build any momentum toward's the AL's high risk confrontation strategy, will be whether the announced November 24 hartal is widely observed. The BNP, with their reputation as guardians

of public order on the line, showed they can provide effective security with little or no outsized violence such as a repeat of August 21, 2004, yet still managed to place obstacles in the path of the opposition, so as not to let them forget who is in power.

CHAMMAS